

CPYRGHT

No 'Undue Haste' In Swearing In a President

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By ARTHUR KROCK

WASHINGTON, Jan. 7—Not until the abridged and unabridged texts of "The Death of a President" have been published can it be determined just what aspects of the conduct of Lyndon B. Johnson at Dallas, on Nov. 22, 1963, incurred the adverse criticism of the Kennedy family. But if the gravamen of the charge proves to be "undue haste" in carrying out the constitutional mandate for Presidential succession, it should have no more claim to public acceptance than is inherent in an understanding of the emotions of a family in the ghastly circumstances.

Both historical precedents and the perils of these exigent times sustain Mr. Johnson's decision to reduce to the lowest possible minimum the period in which the Presidential office was vacant.

A Different Ago

The outstanding precedent was established by Charles Evans Hughes in his capacity as Secretary of State when Warren G. Harding died in office on Aug. 2, 1923. It merits this rating because, unlike the equally prompt measures taken in 1945 to swear in Vice President Harry S. Truman on the sudden death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mr. Truman was in Washington and instantly available. In 1923 Vice President Coolidge was inaccessible for hours at his father's house in Vermont.

The new perils of the exigency which confronted Mr. Johnson at Dallas require no further explanation than that the situation arose in the age of atomic weaponry, when only the President of the United States has the power and authority to decide whether or not defense of the national security requires resort to nuclear warfare.

But it is also pertinent to point out that this and other modern dangers implicit in even the slightest lapse in the continuity of the presi-

dency have finally moved Congress to submit to the states a constitutional amendment providing for this continuity in instances when the President is unable to exercise the powers and duties of his office.

None of these pre-nuclear perils existed to the current degree when Secretary Hughes took immediate measures to have the Presidential oath administered to Mr. Harding's Vice President, Calvin Coolidge.

The atomic age was years away from the concept of mankind. The threat of hostile governments to the security of the United States was thought to have been removed, at least for the remainder of the 20th century, by the defeat of the Central Powers in the First World War. The corruption of high officials that had irrevocably stained the Harding Administration was under punitive investigation by the Congress. And the United States was moving toward the peak of the economic prosperity whose instability was not to be demonstrated until the crash of the stock market six years thereafter.

Newsboys Cried 'Extra!'

It was in these easy circumstances that Allen W. Dulles, then a division chief in the State Department, emerged from a late Washington dinner-party onto Sixteenth Street to hear the newsboys crying "Extra!" The copy he bought conveyed the information that President Harding had died suddenly in San Francisco. Thereupon, with the alertness which has characterized Mr. Dulles's long and distinguished career as an intelligence officer, he swiftly set in motion the official activities that led to the prompt swearing-in of the new President of the United States.

Mr. Dulles arrived at the State Department to find only a clerk on duty. In a very short time Mr. Dulles had located Stanley Hawkes, then the

information chief of the department, and wakened Secretary Hughes, who was at home in Silver Spring, a Washington suburb. In these times when every high Federal official has a car and chauffeur at his instant disposal, it seems incredible that Mr. Hughes had neither. But Mr. Hawkes owned a speedy sports car, and he and Mr. Dulles made record time in picking up the Secretary at Silver Spring, seven miles away, and bringing him to the State Department.

Vice President Coolidge was asleep in his father's house at Plymouth Notch, Vt. There was no telephone. So, while the Secretary was examining the precedents, his two assistants enlisted the telephone company in finding a subscriber at Plymouth Notch to whom a summons to Mr. Coolidge could be given and delivered. In about an hour a sleepy Vice President was on the phone with the Secretary, a useful delay as it proved, because not until Mr. Dulles unearthed a copy of the World Almanac in the department was Mr. Hughes provided with the text of the Presidential oath.

A Special Train

As Mr. Dulles recalls it, the sequel was as follows:

The Secretary, after informing Mr. Coolidge of President Harding's death, urged him to take the oath at once. The Vice President's father produced the necessary Bible, a family heirloom, and, being a notary public, was assured by the Secretary he was qualified to administer the oath, which Mr. Hughes dictated over the telephone.

On being advised that he should return to Washington as quickly as possible, the new President remarked he supposed he could get a Pullman berth on the train that left Plymouth the following evening. "I will have a special train there for you later this morning," the Secretary replied. His grin and those of his associates at Mr. Coolidge's instinctively frugal and unworldly proposal were, of course, invisible at the other end of the telephone.

The 1923 example was only one of the precedents which Mr. Johnson properly and responsibly followed at Dallas.